The Origins of My PM Minimalism:

It's Not Merely Simple-Minded... It's About PM Essences

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"The ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak."
– *Hans Hofmann*

"Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication." – *Leonardo DaVinci*

"Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler." – *Albert Einstein*

My Somewhat Jaded Perspective

As I grow older I am less inclined to seek anyone's approval for my professional opinions. I've got enough miles on my career to have come to my own conclusions about what matters most and to feel a certain confidence in these conclusions, validated by lots of experience. And I can distinguish valuable best practices from self-serving B.S.

One source of such B.S. is the tendency of consultants and professional certifying bodies, over time, to push and stretch their fields of expertise so as to cause them to become increasingly complex and impenetrable to newcomers.

Whether this drive for complexity is fueled by the experts' boredom and need for intellectual challenge or it is consciously contrived to create "client dependency" on the part of the newbies whom they are purposely baffling, it has the same result: It serves to ensnare anyone who steps into, and subsequently gets stuck in, the new conceptual webs.

Thus ensnared, the newbie-victims must purchase intricate tools and support services to unravel the mysterious new concepts, master them, and get "up to speed" on these latest and greatest methodologies. Having done so, the newbies are happy because they have acquired new tools and confidence. (Whether this confidence is justified or merely illusory is an open question!) At the same time, the consultants and professional organizations are happy, having taken on a new intellectual challenge, developed a shiny new conceptual system, and created a new business line and revenue stream. So it would

seem that everyone wins when a field of practice such as project management (PM) becomes increasingly self-analytical and complex.

It's Minimalist... Not Simple-Minded!

On the other hand, I am haunted by those powerful quotes (above) from Einstein and DaVinci, et al that extol the virtues of simplicity. In fact, they imply that **the highest use of expertise and years of hard-won wisdom may be to reduce confusion... to "cut to the chase" ... to seek out the essences** that can best be discovered through the lens of sophistication and years of experience.

Now maybe it's my age and extensive career mileage. Or maybe it's my decades-long struggle to find ways to cut through PM complexity to help struggling newbies in my workshops become productive quickly. Whatever the reason, I find these quotes to be quite compelling. To me they are beacons shining a light toward a better way to approach PM. In short, those quotes embody the spirit in which my PM Minimalism was created.

Unfortunately, the word "minimalism" is easily misunderstood. Here's a frustrating example – a true story.

Recently I was sharing my career milestones with a respected senior-level management consultant whom I had just met. Before we spoke he had read my bio, investigated my work, and generally become familiar with my professional achievements.

Still, toward the end of our discussion, he admitted to having an "Aha" moment when he realized how the Project Management Minimalist concept had evolved. To paraphrase him, he said: "I'm honestly surprised at your depth of experience. To tell you the truth, 'Minimalist' could be taken to mean 'superficial' or 'overly simplistic.' So I wasn't sure how much you really knew about PM, since I only became acquainted with you through PM Minimalism. Yet after hearing about all your experiences in the PM field, I see how your Minimalist concept has evolved. And it seems well-grounded. It all makes sense."

"NUTS!" I said to myself after this discussion. Could other people be interpreting my use of the word "minimalist" to mean "superficial" or "simplistic?" For me, the word "minimalism" is all about finding the essence... the critical core... that which matters most! For me, PM Minimalism certainly is not superficial, but instead focuses on revealing PM essentials. And the formal definition offered by Wikipedia agrees:

> *"Minimalism describes movements... where the work is stripped down to its most fundamental features." (See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minimalism)*

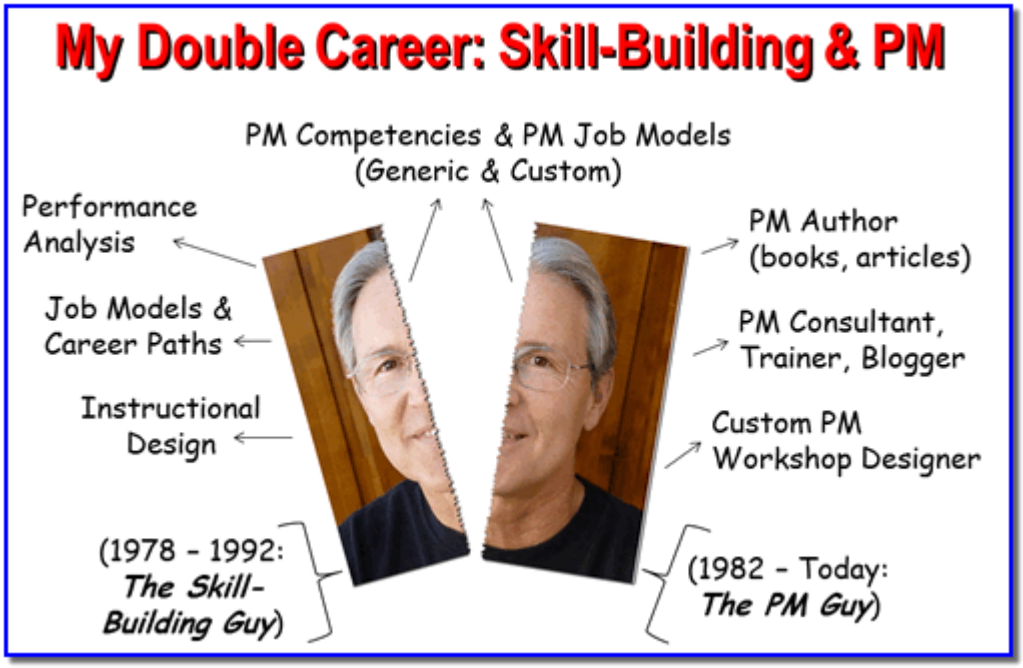
Exactly! That's what I'm talking about: PM stripped down to its most fundamental features. And there's nothing superficial or simplistic about it.

Who Am I to Reduce PM to Its Essences?

So what makes me think I'm qualified to strip PM down to its essences? That's easy. I'm older than many of the PM experts out there and I have seen waves of complexity come and go, then come back and go again! I've spent nearly three decades trying to help people apply PM in all sorts of fields and industries. What's more, I've got a long history analyzing and designing training and performance support systems in order to help people "cut through the crap" of all that "nice to know" stuff and find the "need to know... need to do" skills that enhance their productivity and effectiveness. *(For a detailed audit trail, see "Addendum: My Long Journey Toward PM Minimalism" at the end of this article.)*

The graphic below shows how my double career as both a "Skill Building Guy" and a "PM Guy" has meant that I've spent a long time creating results in both these domains. The Skill Building Guy has worked with subject matter experts in many different fields and industries to create the kinds of outcomes that professional training, HR and performance improvement people typically create. On the other hand, as I managed project teams to develop tangible, multi-media deliverables, I began to reflect on the PM process itself – to study it as a discipline and then to write about it.

The result is that I've published many journal articles, countless blog posts, six books, lots of videos, dozens of podcasts and webinars – all in an ongoing quest to demystify PM and make it accessible to newbies.



Over the years, as a result of interactions with thousands of readers, media viewers, and training audiences, I've developed **two core values related to my work with PM:**

1. **Effective PM performance is more important than PM theory.** That is, what newbie project managers need is useful tools, not dense textbooks.

2. **I want to make sure PM stays out of the way of the expert practitioners.** Specifically, the skilled "worker bees" and SMEs who are working hard to create something new shouldn't be burdened by PM administrivia. At its best, PM should enhance, rather than smother, the work of project teams. At its worst, **PM for PM's sake is worthless**!

Seen through the lens of these values, **I have come to view all intentional PM complexity with skepticism.**

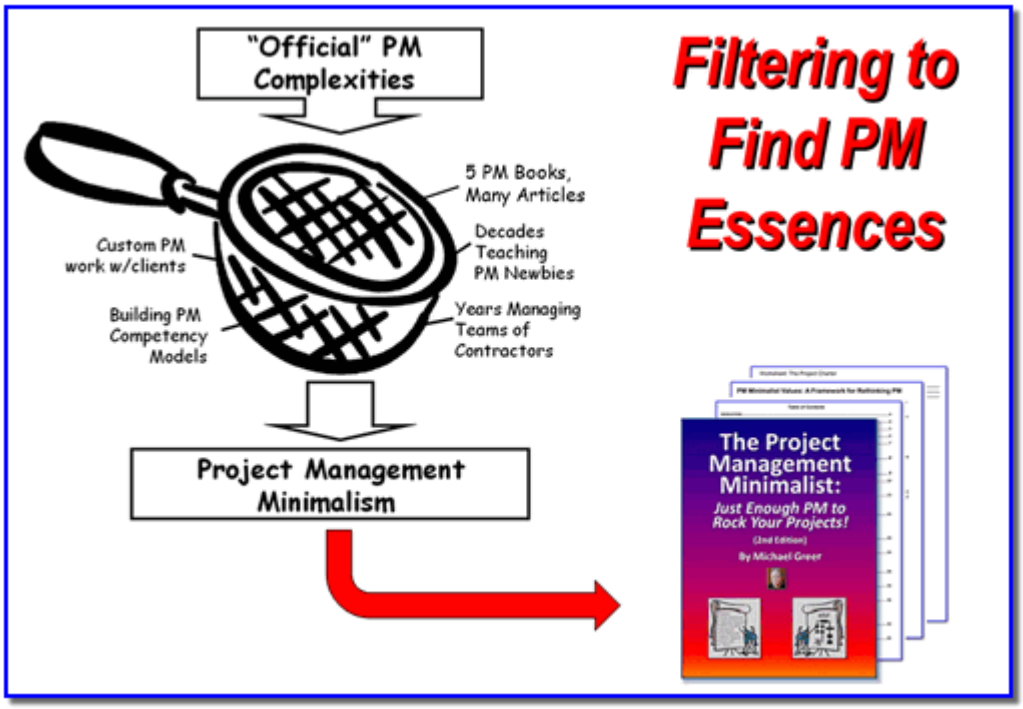
It Was My Students Who Taught Me to Simplify

Now, I haven't always felt this way. In the early days of my work as a PM consultant and trainer I was as impressed as the next guy with the complex, mysterious, and sometimes arcane practices advocated by the PM gurus and professional associations. After all, whose heart doesn't beat faster in the presence of an artfully-crafted earned value analysis or comparison of planned versus actual project progress? (*Really?*)

However, **as I spent time with classes of PM newbies** and helped them grow into more effective project managers, something magical began to happen. **All the superfluous complexity just naturally began falling away.** My students and clients, in their passion to do good and timely work in their areas of expertise, began pushing back against my official PM process recommendations and insisted on dropping all the complex stuff that didn't work for them. They decided that these things just didn't matter.

So what was left? The most valuable essences of PM... the simplest, most powerful parts... the PM tools and practices that worked well, yet didn't get in the way.

And **that's how PM Minimalism was born. I simply summarized and polished all the PM tools and practices that seem to have universal power for new project managers everywhere.** Then I ditched the rest! The following graphic illustrates the conscious and unconscious "filtering" processes that helped me shape my PM Minimalism.



What was left after this filtering process was similar to what is left when you convert a long-winded piece of prose into poetry: essences... clean, powerful, and yes, simple (though often profound) essences. What was left is the stuff that's fairly easy to do, stays out of the way, and enhances the work of the project team.

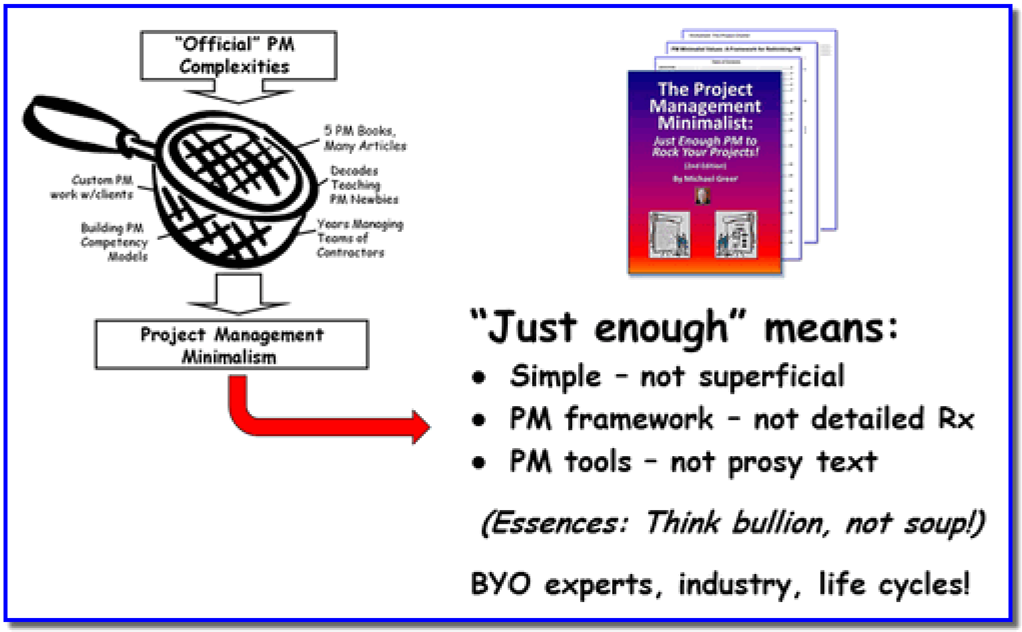
Now the good news is that you don't have to travel my decades-long path through the jungles of PM complexity to discover these essences for yourself. My clients, students, and colleagues have traveled that road with me and taught me all sorts of valuable PM lessons. Together we stumbled, fell, got beat up, and became scarred. And to honor our bruising journey, I have captured what we learned so you don't have to waste your time going down the same blind alleys we did.

The result? A tight little set of practices I call **PM Minimalism**. As I've said in the book, it's not rocket science! And (gasp!) **it's so easy to apply you don't need consultants or trainers or (more importantly) costly and time-consuming PM certification** to practice it.

But make no mistake. **PM Minimalism is made up of the PM practices that are tried and true and universal.** And practicing PM Minimalism will most likely get you some very good results with your project teams. And finally, while it certainly won't dazzle your local "born again" PMP who gets off on baffling his co-workers with esoteric PM terminology and arcane practices, **PM Minimalism will gently guide your team and**

accomplish what the best management methodologies should always accomplish: It will help you get better results while remaining quietly unobtrusive.

As the graphic below illustrates, it's all about achieving "Just Enough" PM so that it does no harm.



So now I say it loud: **I'm a PM Minimalist and I'm proud!** I'm proud to be getting the positive feedback from my readers and students, proud of the Minimalist's university book adoptions, and proud to be sharing these PM essences with overworked project managers and teams everywhere. If PM Minimalism helps to make their work lives a little easier and more productive, then all the effort's been worth it.

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Related Articles & Videos:

- **My Incredible Shrinking PM Recommendations, http://michaelgreer.biz/?p=726**
- ***(Video)* Loops & Hoops & Waterfalls: A PM Minimalist Perspective on Agile, Scrum & … (Yada, Yada), http://michaelgreer.biz/?p=2852**
- **Seven Benefits of Local PM Certification: Why Pursuing Locally-Relevant PM Skills Makes More Sense Than Buying Generic, External PM Certifications, http://michaelgreer.biz/?p=2460**
- **Video Overviews: The PM Minimalist Collection, http://michaelgreer.biz/?page_id=2632**

Addendum: My Long Journey Toward PM Minimalism

Below I offer the following rather long list of dates and hot-shot experiences as evidence that **I didn't come to my vision of PM Minimalism quickly or superficially.** My PM Minimalist world-view has been years, and many publications, in the making. Feel free to email me at pm.minimalist@gmail.com for more info on any of these items.

- ***1978 - 94:*** Armed with a graduate degree, experience as Director of a university Learning Resources Center, and university teaching experience, I enter the business world to work as a **consultant to Fortune 100 companies, non-profit organizations, and government agencies**. I spend these years analyzing workplace training and performance problems, then prescribing, developing, and testing performance-enhancing tools and training in many different subject areas related to new products (hardware and software). I manage project teams doing all of the above.

- ***1984 - 85:*** (approx.) Conduct **PM (project management) training needs/skill requirements analysis** for Xerox.

- ***1985 - 87***: (approx.) **Develop & regularly teach a customized, week-long project management course** for Xerox (Video & course won several **awards**.)

- ***1988 - 89:*** Publish a 10-part series on **Project Management for Performance & Instruction Journal*** (ISPI publication)

- ***1991:*** Publish a chapter on PM in the college text: **Instructional Design: Principles & Applications***

- ***1992:*** Publish a book, **ID Project Management: Tools & Techniques for Instructional Designers & Developers**, Educational Technology Publications

- ***1992 - 93:*** Publish 2-part **series** (survey, analysis, & results) **Critical Attributes of ID Project Success** (Performance & Instruction Journal)*

- ***1985 - present:*** **Teach customized, hands-on, on-site PM workshops** for organizations (private & public sector, in many different industries in US, Canada, UK, and Chile -- See client list here -- http://michaelgreer.biz/?page_id=27). Publish **books**, **articles**, & **podcasts**; run online **webinars**; manage three PM-related **websites**; and generally help newbies everywhere become proficient in PM. http://michaelgreer.biz/?page_id=55

- ***1996 - 97:*** Analyze **PMI's PMBOK** materials and (working with multi-industry partners, including people from Microsoft, Xerox, Apria Healthcare, AT&T, The Southern Company, etc.) distill "**20 Key Actions & Results**" from PMBOK's concept-based materials. http://michaelgreer.biz/?p=118

- ***1997:*** Publish **first edition, The Project Manager's Partner***, HRD Press (tools to build skills & support **20 Key Actions**, above) http://michaelgreer.biz/?p=208

- ***1998:*** (approx.) Develop & coordinate the **first-ever annual conference track** devoted to **PM** for **ISPI** (International Society for Performance Improvement)

- ***1999:*** Publish **The Manager's Pocket Guide to Project Management***, HRD Press

- ***1999:*** Write "**Chapter 6: Planning and Managing Human Performance Technology Projects**," in **Handbook of Human Performance Technology 2nd Edition**, Jossey Bass-Pfeiffer*

- ***1999 - 2000:*** (approx.) Serve on **Gartner Institute's Advisory Board** to help develop certification specifications for **IT/PM**

- ***2001:*** Publish **The Project Manager's Partner, 2nd edition*** with enhancements based on 4 years consulting & teaching with the previous edition of the book

- ***2003:*** Conduct comprehensive PM performance analysis, then develop **PM job model and career path** for multi-national logistics corporation **Siemans-Dematic**. Specify comprehensive PM training curriculum & PM tools to support this career path.

- ***2004:*** Evaluate and contribute to the newly-formed **asapm**'s (American Society for the Advancement of Project Management) comprehensive statements of **essential PM competencies**

- ***2004 - 2009:*** Develop the **knawing suspicion**, based on years of experience with many different clients and their newby project managers, that the **existing body of PM tools, trainings, certifications, and theory is vastly overblown**! (And decide that what really seems to matter is a powerful subset of simple, practical tools and processes.)

- ***2010:*** Publish **The Project Management Minimalist: Just Enough PM to Rock Your Projects (1st edition) ***

- ***2010:*** Consult with **Laureate Education's Walden University** to structure an online PM track for their **Masters Degree in Instructional Design** (later, integrate my new text, *The Project Management Minimalist* into this curriculum) http://michaelgreer.biz/?p=1078

- ***2011:*** Consult with **Franklin University (Columbus, Ohio)** to help integrate PM best practices into their **M.S. in Instructional Design & Performance Technology (IDPT)** Degree Program http://www.michaelgreer.biz/PM_Minimalist/Update/update-2.html

- ***2011:*** Create a **customized PM skill-building case study** for **Franklin University's** IDPT Degree Program

- ***2011:*** Publish **The Project Management Minimalist (2nd edition)***, along with scripted **Mentoring** guide and **video disk** with tutorials. http://michaelgreer.biz/?page_id=2632

- ***2011:*** Publish a rather skeptical 16-page work titled **"Do-It-Yourself PM Certification: How to Document Your Skills & Get the Credibility You've Earned without Jumping Through Someone Else's Hoops"** http://michaelgreer.biz/?p=1450 and related blog posts/videos such as **"Loops & Hoops & Waterfalls: A PM Minimalist Perspective on Agile, Scrum & … (Yada, Yada)"** http://michaelgreer.biz/?p=2852

- ***2011:*** Create customized version of **The Project Management Minimalist textbook (hard copy) specifically for Franklin University's MS/IDPT** program and make available "on demand" through Amazon's CreateSpace https://www.createspace.com/3592078

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* To see the full citation (publication date, ISBN, etc.) for this item go to the webpage, **Greer's Publications**, **http://michaelgreer.biz/?page_id=39**